¿A New University for New Times?
Regulated autonomy, market competition and individualism
considering the Mexican experience

A Latin American Response to Policy Changes in Higher Education reform
Comparative and International Education Society
CIES 2003 Annual Meeting:
A Conversation on Educational Achievements Globally
Michigan State University and Dillard University
March 12-16, 2003, New Orleans

Professor Eduardo Ibarra-Colado
Organization Studies Research Group
Department of Economics
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa
Apartado Postal 86-113, Villa Coapa 14391, Mexico, D.F.
Phone: + (525) + 804 6565 and 804 4794, Fax: + (525) + 5804 4794
E-mail: eic@xanum.uam.mx and eibarra@sni.conacyt.mx
¿A New University for New Times?
Regulated autonomy, market competition and individualism
considering the Mexican experience

Eduardo Ibarra-Colado*
Organization Studies Research Group
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, Mexico

Abstract

The paper analyses the impact of recent transformations of the university sector in Mexico. It does so in the context of a sector changed significantly by new regulation policies and rules, technologies and procedures, introduced as apart of the modernization process. It highlights some of the effects of these changes in the recreation of institutions and the changing make-up of the identities of those people who comprise their subjects. Two of the more radical changes are the subject of particular concern. First, the operation of new policies based on the articulation of rules, technologies and procedures of evaluation of results, extraordinary funding programs, and specific demands for change made to the institutions. Second, the operation of new policies for the conduct of the subjects of the university, based on the articulation of individualized evaluation procedures, compensatory salary programmes, legitimised through the quantification of academic performance, and demands for the reconstruction of organizational behaviours and ways of being. On this basis, we will propose an interpretation of some of the possible long-term consequences implied by this new government regime, highlighting their impact on academic work.

Introduction

Today, throughout the world, the transformation processes faced by universities are being broadly debated in the context of the “new” society of globally articulated knowledge. Most of the cases are based on European or –US oriented– frameworks. From these frameworks, analysis

* Eduardo Ibarra-Colado is Professor of Organization Studies at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa in Mexico City and Researcher Level II of the National System of Researchers (SNI). Actually, he coordinates the Permanent Seminar on Studies about Higher Education at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). His main fields of research are Organization Studies and Higher Education Studies, fields in which he had already published and edited thirteen books, and a lot of chapters and articles in specialized journals. His most important books related with Higher Education Studies are La universidad ante el espejo de la excelencia (UAM 1993, 1998) and La universidad en México hoy: gubernamentalidad y modernización (UNAM 2001).
is made of globalisation, the society of knowledge, and post-modern organizations. In addition, the apparent victory of information technologies, which have allowed us to conquer space limitations and to meticulously take advantage of the smallest unit of time, encourages the exaggerated optimism with which the new millennium is being received (Giddens 1990). The unquestionable supremacy of knowledge is being viewed as a key element in global society with which to do away with –this time definitively– the labels that have been employed in the past. No longer will there be capitalism or socialism, only the global world of the market, democracy and information.

The university is today at the centre of these discursive renovations. As the depository of the highest aspirations of modernity, it has been proclaimed as one of the most “pure” modern institutions because it is the repository of order and reason, thanks to accumulated knowledge. Due to its vocation for objectivity, rigor, and empirical proof, the university was assimilated into a key role in social progress – a modernizing agency par excellence dispensing truth and wisdom from an elite place. Now, however, the deep going transformation of the world demands that the university once and for all abandon the serenity of any attempt at an ivory tower existence. To overcome its traditional isolation, universities are assuming new, more flexible structures, capable of responding to scientific-technological demands and the formation of human resources for a very dynamic, integrated, and highly competitive economy (Clark 1998; Gibbons et al. 1994).

Recent changes in universities, in this logic, are thus a response to the imperatives of globalising markets. As universities open up to other forms of organization their knowledge-containing boundaries become increasingly blurred. University-industry-government agreements of collaboration to guarantee the new production of knowledge are increasingly common
(Gibbons et al. 1994; Marceau 1996; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997; Etzkowitz et al. 1998; cf. Soley 1995). In addition, the relation between the national States and their universities have been modified, with new forms of “steering from a distance” coming into play, under the principles of market competition and regulated autonomy. Universities have also begun to diversify the educational and scientific programmes they offer to the market, differentiating their portfolio of “products”, which are now being promoted, next to commercial items, on advertising platforms (both virtual and actual) which boast about the highest international standards of quality. Given this situation, academicians and students are faced with new modes of existence based less on collegialism and more on individualism and competition. In addition, new forms of administration and institutional leadership have been gaining ground, on the basis of which the university begins to be reconstituted as a bureaucratic corporation dedicated to the business of knowledge – a new kind of knowledge bureaucracy for knowledge workers (Clark 1998; cf. Slaughter and Leslie 1997).

Within the limits established by these new discourses and their deceptive moves beyond bureaucracy, few spaces exist to recognize and analyse the consequences of the deep going transformations presupposed by the global economy and the emergence of cyber-society. In this new [hyper-]modern rhetoric triumphalism of has reduced the emerging reality to its own discursive games (Slater 1996). Fortunately, an increasing number of researchers have been ready to reflect on these problems in very different terms (Ibarra-Colado 1998, 2001; Readings 1996; Marginson 1997a; Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Jary and Parker 1998; Bond and Lemasson 1999).

One of the axes of recent discussion has been analysis of the local implications and social consequences of this global reorganization of the university and knowledge. Despite the global tendencies, it is of great importance to recognize the differences among diverse national realities.
[as well as the variation that exists within each one of them]. As higher education becomes a global market, particularly for the elites of developing countries, a new international division of university labour has begun to be consolidated in which the production of leading knowledge generally remains in elite universities of the main European and North American countries. It is in these countries that the higher-level cadres of most of the countries of the world are educated. In contrast, countries at the outer limits of “underdevelopment” increasingly receive and consume this leading knowledge to train the lower and middle level technical and professional employees. Consideration of this problem facilitates a greater understanding of local transformations, allowing us not only to appreciate the differences between countries but also variations within them that do not seem to validate a universal pattern that all should follow (Radhakrishnan 1994).

In countries such as Mexico, for instance, where only 15 of every 100 college-age youth attend university (Gil 1996: 310), the context is one where research is increasingly concentrated in a small group of internationally linked sites of “excellence”. Furthermore, the formation of the national elites takes place principally in private universities and is increasingly “finished-off” in institutions in the USA and Europe. Present reforms seek to divide the university and separate research and postgraduate formation from the mass-scale education of technicians and associated professionals (Ibarra-Colado 1998: 139-145). To improve quality, government argues that it is necessary to decrease the student population and reorient it to technological and short-term options (ANUIES 2000; Reséndiz 2000). This dual structure counterpoises the educational excellence of elites with the increasing abandonment of education for the masses. What is at stake is the control of the production of knowledge and its social distribution, a factor that makes universities increasingly conflictual settings.
Modernization policies establish a university radically different from ones that we knew in the past. Government policies during the 1990s sought to transform the university system in response to some of the economic, social, and symbolic demands derived from the processes of global integration. Such transformations found clear expression in deep modifications of the governmental regime of universities. These changes promoted autonomous action, by university institutions and agents, based on marked measures, with the purpose of eliminating the “culture of dependence” encouraged by the Welfare State for more than five decades (Keat 1991). The new identity flourished alongside an increasingly remote control steering capacity by both the State and the educational institutions, usually exercised through diverse technologies of coordination and evaluation.

I will analyse the impact of the recent transformations of the university in Mexico to illuminate the role new discourses and practice play in the re-creation of the identities of university institutions and their social subjects. Such changes have different impacts on each of the universities, depending on their particular histories and the local conditions in which they operate, as well as different categories within them. The impact will differ among academicians, diverse student groupings, administrative employees and their unions, or university and government officials. I will analyse the impact of modernization policies on the institutional conditions of academic work. I will demonstrate how these have facilitated the construction of a new academic identity of self-management and excellence and point-up some of its consequences.

In the Mexican context one can identify the essential characteristics of the new governmental regime of universities, and its specific mode of rationality, by distinguishing two of its more radical changes. On the one hand, the operation of new policies based on the articulation
of rules, technologies and procedures of evaluation of results, extraordinary funding programmes, and specific demands for change to the institutions. On the other hand, the operation of new policies governing staff conduct, as subjects of the university, based on the articulation of individualized evaluation procedures, compensatory salary programmes legitimised through the quantification of academic performance, and demands involving the reconstruction of behaviours and ways of being. On this basis, I will propose in the final part of this study, an interpretation of some of the possible consequences implied by this new mode of rationality. I will highlight its impact on academic work and how an increasingly “Anglo-centric” identity is being attached to the category “academic”. (The theoretical foundation of this perspective and its empirical support can be found in Ibarra-Colado 1999, 2001).

Specific discursive strategies of managerialism have associated the formation of a “new university” with quality and excellence. New attitudes, values and forms of self-identification encourage responsible action by each individual, group, and institution to provide for itself. At centre place in these discursive games is the practice of evaluation, which loses its traditional punitive character and becomes a subtle procedure of recognition and differentiation that demonstrates the degree to which strategic missions and objectives have been met. All those who participate in and make the work of each institution possible, must demonstrate that they are prepared to comply with the practical autonomy (Peters and Waterman 1982) with which they have been conferred. Teaching and research activities, tasks involving institutional management and links with society, scholastic activities, and administrative support tasks, are all relocated under new schemes that require entrepreneurial movers and shakers. Their role is to market everything produced in academia and the university, closing the door on any nostalgia for the now bygone era of an academic vocation and an appreciation of knowledge per se. Instead, the
emphasis is on the differentiation of academic products and the identification of market niches, in addition to assuring appropriate communicative links to markets in which the needs of consumer-students and expectations of consumer-businessmen can be attended to seamlessly.

While the possible consequences of this yet unfinished process of construction of new institutional conditions for work, study and management are still not totally clarified the debate can be theoretically focused. Five central elements indicate the presence, in very diverse national realities (Neave and Vught 1991, 1994; Ibarra-Colado 1998; Schuller 1995; Marginson 1997b, Jary and Parker 1998), of what we can characterize as a mode of neo-liberal rationality (Foucault 1997; see also Burchell *et al.* 1991; Barry *et al.* 1996). These central elements are:

a) the emergence of the “Audit State”, which operates new technologies of steering from a distance, centred on the evaluation of results, leaving the day-to-day management of the processes to the institutions (Power 1997; see also Neave 1988, 1998);

b) the development of new forms of funding – including its diversification and the operation of extraordinary funding based on performance indicators – backed by a clearer linking of the university with the economy and society, in order to confront budget cutbacks derived from the fiscal crisis created by the withdrawal of government funding and the growing costs of education and science (Johnstone 1998);

c) the diversification and stratification of National Higher Education Systems to fulfil a balance deemed appropriate between technological and university education and between shorter certificate, diploma-level programs and degrees
that are typically longer. This also requires national coordination of an increasingly complex system, especially as it is internationalised to participate in global networks of production of knowledge (Currie and Newson 1998; Bond and Lemasson 1999; ANUIES 2000);

d) the administrative modernization of institutions increasingly oriented to clear criterion of efficiency, instead of the “political model” of day-to-day leadership employed in the past; and

e) the operation of merit pay and pay for performance programmes, based on the periodical evaluation of academic work on the basis of international productivity indicators and standards.

Institutional regulation policies

The modernization programme in Mexico [applied from 1989 onwards] radically transformed the nature and forms of the relations between the state and the university. Additionally, as well as redefinition of the main government policies regulating the whole Higher Education System it also affected each separate institution. To understand some of its consequences, it is necessary to have as our starting point an identification of the array of forces that facilitated the incorporation of a new mode of rationality, on the basis of which such relations were redefined (Figure 1). There were three major agents in this first level of relations. In the first place are two government agencies directed from the office of the Presidency through two important public policy instruments. These are the Public Education Ministry (SEP), which operates the strategies and programmes for the sector, and the Finance and Public Credit Ministry (SHCP), which is in
charge of subsidy policies and the funding of universities. In addition, modernization has been materialized in the creation of new government agencies or in the adaptation of others that were already in existence, to operate the mechanisms of institutional change. It is necessary to emphasize the strategic role of the Department of Higher Education and Scientific Research (SESIC) of the SEP, since it functions as a go-between in the processes involving evaluation procedures and the administration of extraordinary funds for special programmes.

Figure 1. Institutional regulation policies: evaluation + funding = institutional change
Behind the State there is a second series of agents that indicate the international dimension of the modernization programmes. Considerable convergence occurs between the discourses and programmes of various international institutions. These include the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Mexican government (SEP 1994, 1995) has sustained widely known programmes with the support of their analysts and experts. Such institutions have taken charge of synthesizing the new mode of rationality for regulating university systems through market-oriented rules in the era of globalisation.

The country’s universities themselves, headed by high-level officials and the administrative and political cadre that support them, represent the other major participating agents. Here it is necessary to highlight the role played by the large universities in the country’s capital [UNAM and UAM] and the growing activity of the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES) in the discussion and operation of the new strategies and programmes (ANUIES 2000).

These forces and relations define the way in which the university is run, through visualising the effects that its functioning could generate on different sectors of the population. They occur in the spaces of intervention and regulation of the National University System, with a very different impact on each of the institutions. The State acts on the university, so that the university, in turn, acts as an institution that runs the life of the people within it as a social body. In this scenario of relations among forces, the modernization of the university operates through new policies of institutional regulation with specific rules, technologies and procedures to conduct change based on the concept of regulated autonomy. These policies, more complex than
those that functioned in the past, articulate institutional changes in evaluation and funding. Their objective is running the institutions in accordance with what is stipulated in governmental strategies and programmes, providing them with a new identity that indicates their renewed social functionality. Modernization presupposes a radical break of the institution with its past. It begins to displace the university as a basic cultural reference point of society in favour of reconstituting it as a “modern bureaucratic corporation” dedicated to the production of professionals and knowledge required by the new modes of operation of the economy and society (Readings 1996).

What we wish to emphasize is that the state seems to no longer need, as in the past, a university that legitimizes its social projects, that allows it to effect political exchanges with the sectors that demand higher education, since political backing for the government today takes other forms. We cannot fail to mention the role played by the mass media as a cultural artefact shaping consciousness, reorienting the collective social imagination. The definition of power relations also presupposes a new articulation of government agencies with the strategic mass communication sector, mainly through relations with “popular” television and radio (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Universities increasingly appear as a social image in these media outlets, projected to the consciousness of individuals through their new modern organizational/entrepreneurial identity.

Universities have become an institution searching for specific “academic” purposes, strictly on the margins of politics, producing and transmitting knowledge, attending to local needs. In accordance with this new logic, they should be guided by strict criteria of technical efficiency, with the purpose of appropriately fulfilling their new functions, thus becoming an essential motor force for a modernity thus far lacking. Therefore, we should not be surprised that starting from 1989-1990, the Mexican government has shifted its emphasis from planning toward
evaluation, and with it, from regulating a process to verifying results (SEP 1991). This intention, centred on auditing, implies the negotiation of a more complex strategy, in which the discourse takes material form by means of rules, technologies, and procedures that have an impact on very specific institutional environments. As pointed out elsewhere (Ibarra-Colado 1996), the discourse on excellence became concretised in the operation of evaluation technologies that allowed government far greater regulation and intervention in the system. In fact, the institutions have adopted the instrumentation of self-evaluation systems, developed from the bottom up, internalising accountability as a separate problem.

It is commonly assumed that the neo-liberal mode of rationality implies a reduction in state intervention through transferring relations among agents from the realm of society to the market. However, as the case of the university clearly shows, what really occurs is a transformation in the forms assumed by such an intervention, which become more direct and effective but at the same time less visible for society. This shift is aimed at steering from a distance – remote control – of the activities of institutions by means of periodically monitoring their results. Universities become responsible for their own functioning and have to demonstrate to the state that they fulfil the functions for which they were created. These are now defined in terms of terminal efficiency, the level of employment achieved by their graduates; the links they maintain with industry and society, and the adaptation of their functioning and normative structure as circumstances require (CONPES 1993). These become some of the measures that allow for the differentiation and categorization of each of the institutions with respect to the others, at the same defining the access that they might have to extraordinary resources or preferential treatment on the part of the government.
New government policies also have the advantage of allowing for a more coherent regulation of the National University System in its unity/diversity. The punctual evaluation of the results of each institution lead to an overview of the system as a whole, enabling institutional specificities to be detected that were simply ignored in the past. In the recognition of the specific features of each institution, there is an expressed intention that the National System, which requires greater coordination, can be made more integrated and flexible, taking advantage of complementary elements and differences that facilitate new economies (ANUIES 2000: 117).

In synthesis, the first level of relations demonstrates the radical character of the change in the governmental regime of the university. The evaluation and funding programmes offer an opportunity to achieve the institutionalisation of a new identity for the university sector as a modern bureaucratic corporation at the service of the economy and society. Under the auspices of a regulated autonomy, whose counterpart is steering from a distance by government agencies, the university today faces a new mode of existence marked by accountability for its performance.

**Academic professionalization policies**
The second array of forces and relations that we wish briefly to examine concerns different organizational spaces, those pertaining to the subjects that make the very existence of the university possible (Figure 2). In this case, the same mode of rationality is also functioning, but it does so through employing a new set of conduct/control rules, technologies and procedures, from which the modes of existence or lifestyles of the “subjects” of the university are reinvented. Today, the subjects of the university are very different from those that occupied these spaces in the past; the mentality and the actions of individuals and groups have been radically transformed,
foreshadowing a scenario in which excellence, independently of its meaning, is erected as a norm.

**Figure 2. Academic professionalization policies:**

*merit pay + academic training = new identities*

The logic of transformations, in the case of academic staff, presents important parallels with respect to other social agents in the university. The academics are subject to a profound process of professionalization that implies the radical reinvention of the ethos that gave them a sense of worth in the past. An *academic vocation* has been giving way to *university work*, with a
shift from solidarity to competition and from a commitment to the institution, and other academic colleagues, to the assumption and practice of a possessive individualism without major mediating factors. In this case, the relation between the university and its subjects gives way to a new array of forces that has facilitated the conformation of a new set of rules, technologies and procedures for academic professionalization.

The composition of this second space of relations is more complex than has been observed in the case of the regulation policies developed at the institutional level. It implies that the salary policies negotiated between the institutions and the state, become the reference point for university relations. A first element of this configuration of forces is found in the impact that the institutional regulation policies produced in each institution, reorienting the conduct of their subjects. The university, supported in its governing and administrative bodies, becomes a mechanism for implementing government strategies and programmes. Of course, the relations between government agencies and each of the institutions will determine the room for manoeuvre in each case, explaining why certain programmes were implemented and certain resources were obtained in some institutions and not in others.

The new relations produced within the institutions, in terms of their particular histories, display tensions with the strategies and government programmes applied. Of course, the prime agency represented comprises the institutions themselves, which acquire identifiable characteristics, in the form of their officials and management-level functionaries. In adopting the normative framework, designing new rules, technologies and procedures to carry out evaluations, creating evaluation bodies and committees, they create a new reality for their members. They create structures that apply accounting procedures to measure differentiation.
The other major agents participating in these relationships are the subjects of the evaluation. Academicians become incorporated in different ways, under different modalities, in these new modes of existence. Some do so on a strictly individual level, operating under the new system with the intention of maximizing their marginal utility, for which they mobilize all means at their disposal. There are also research groups that, on the basis of a collegiate structure that recognize the trajectory and the merits of their members, acquire greater organic cohesion, enhancing their possibilities of intervention and negotiation. In addition, some of their more outstanding members participate in the evaluation bodies and committees as authentic gatekeepers, thereby protecting the interests of the groups that they represent. Finally, the academicians organize themselves in a third modality, interorganisational in character that corresponds to the academies, based on the idea of professional or disciplinary organization, from which initiatives for change have come on many occasions.

These three forms operate simultaneously and contradictorily, clearly showing that the evaluation processes imply intense practices of negotiation and exchange among the agents, many times, with the results being determined independently of the evaluated topic. What is involved is to point out openly that behaviour has been verified that will allow the lost trust to be renewed or restored. In reality, it is of little importance how such verification is carried out, because its operating procedures are considered, normatively, to be the exclusive domain of specialists removed from the academic rank and file.

Other important agents that we should not forget are the unions. The legislative reforms of 1978-1980 (SEP/ANUIES 1981: 231-240) limited union’s negotiation capacity, since they were excluded from hiring and promotion processes. Unions today are faced with a new, still
ignored opportunity, related to the innumerable conflicts that the new evaluation practices are generating, for which the institutions are not adequately prepared.

It is in these organizational spaces that we should examine the new policies that articulate evaluation procedures and academic training programmes, with their salary, of each academic staff member, giving way to the process of reconstitution of their identities. On this second level, the starting point of government strategies was based on a thorough redefinition of salary policies and their programmes. Modernization also implies new differentiation technologies that allow for steering from a distance of academic staff and more precise institutional appraisal of their work. The professors and researchers have been acquiring a practical autonomy – or a “supervised freedom” as Hunter (1994: 74) suggests – that allows them to decide how to carry out their work, with the “only” limitation being periodic evaluation in terms of products and productivity. The relational space between the institutions and the state is, in this case, a stage characterized by greater flexibility. Policies limiting legal salary increases implemented during the first part of the 1980s have been developed (Ibarra-Colado and Soria 1996: 337-341) and now find their justification in a policy of extraordinary retribution through competition between institutions. This is the era of merit pay and pay for performance in Mexico.

These academic professionalization policies involve another strategic element that plays a major role in the reinvention of academic identities. These are the aggressive policy of academic training that the government has followed since the beginning of the 1990s. This is particularly through the grant of scholarships on the part of the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) as well as the creation of the Professorial Improvement Programme (PROMEP) (SEP/ANUIES/CONACYT 1996) for full time academic staff of institutions of higher education.
There is a double importance to these policies for promoting academic training. On the one hand, they have been motivated by a medium term [2006] programme whose scope is to reconstitute the academic staff of Mexican universities, facilitating generational renewal (ANUIES 2000: 169-173). On the other hand, the reconstitution of academic identities is based on the professionalization of teaching and research activities. However, for the first time it considers different educational modalities, disciplinary specificities, and type of contract [full, half, or part time]. Therefore, the PROMEP recognizes differentiated academic trajectories that require different academic training policies. Also, the composition of the academic staff responds to the specificities of the institutional mission and to the balance between theoretical knowledge/practical formation required in each specific academic programme (SEP 1996). Thus, academic training policy seeks to establish bases for the consolidation of very different academic subjects. These are people able to participate in the production and transmission of knowledge, leading to the consolidation of a national academic market, that could gradually expand as a result of the free trade agreements promoted by the government on an international level (Aboites 1997). Therefore, these new evaluation/training policies have begun to function as an academic professionalization device that leads to a radical reconstitution of identities and lifestyles.

The two sets of policies that we have examined by no means exhaust the complexity implied in the modernization processes. We must add the operation of other programmes under the same market oriented mode of rationality. Among these are Allotting Resources to Science, the List of Mexican Scientific Journals of Excellence, the List of the Excellent-quality Postgraduate Programmes, the National Indicative Exam prior to the BA, and the General Professional Quality Exam (EGEL), to indicate just the most important. The first two, together with the National System of Researchers (SNI), function as mechanisms for guiding the work of
researchers, by indicating to them the requirements that they must meet to obtain funding for their projects and recognition for their results.

For its part, the List of Excellent-quality Postgraduate Programmes seeks to orient students and professors in academic training toward programmes that respond to a certain profile, very much linked to priorities established in government strategies, in accord with the diagnostic reports undertaken by analysts. The objective here is to correct student demand, attending to priority areas, and to discourage enrolment in fields of knowledge that are quite saturated. Once again, in this case, financial support functions as a key element to “convince” students and academic staff of a given course of action and to annul any possible resistance.

Finally, the latter two programmes, the National Indicative Exam prior to the BA and the EGEL, have begun to give form to a new mechanism for regulating the student body, also on the basis of encouraging competition based on prioritising individual performance. Despite the resistance that has emerged in response to these new programmes and their rules, technologies and procedures, they have begun to show their viability given the social introjection of liberal practices, which dominate many other spaces that operate under this logic.

Some consequences for academic work: fabrication of new identities

The suppositions on which the university should function under the new governmental regime are logically coherent, but not very plausible. The new model promises to construct a society of responsible and independent subjects and institutions that take charge of themselves. However, not recognized is the opportunism that characterizes the behaviour of the social agents (Williamson 1975), nor the fragility of a model that is governed more by economic motives that imply destroying competitors than by ethical behaviours based on solidarity. In addition, this
image of “responsible action” leads to a profoundly voluntaristic conception that has little to do with the viable conditions demanded for the appropriate operation of the model.

As we have already indicated, one of the most significant effects of the new mode of rationality under which the university operates, is the recreation of the social function of institutions and the reinvention of the identities of their subjects. In the universities a debate is underway concerning whether such modifications imply its displacement as a basic cultural reference point of society, in favour of the lower status held by the rest of the organizations that provide some products or services to society. The university ceases to be an “institution” of society to become an “organization” of the market. Its importance in the collective social imagination is relegated to being a provider of educational services and useful knowledge to society.

In the case of the university subjects, be they academicians, students, officials, or employees, there is a discussion as to what degree the changes that have taken place signify the re-fabrication of their identities under the principles of individualism and competition. Mechanically one can consider these as an expression of excellence and capacity for initiative, at least in encouraging utilitarian behaviour in which it is assumed that the end justifies the means. What this produces is a displacement of the substantive purposes previously associated with the university’s endeavours in favour of objectives strictly linked to individual economic realization. Educators or researchers are encouraged to see their mission as one in which, essentially, they are there to make money. What is done is done because one is paid, thus displacing the substantive value of any life project in favour of the quest for a “better” life. At it’s worst this leads to a concern with quantitative inputs such as research dollars earned rather than qualitative outputs.
such as knowledge produced. Why this should be so is evident: for policy-bureaucrats the dollars are easily counted while quality appears somewhat opaque by comparison.

The expected results of the functioning of these new mechanisms regulating the institutions and guiding the behaviour of the agents that participate in them leave much to be desired in terms of achieving an acceptable level of efficiency, even in their own terms. The results of the functioning of the new evaluation mechanisms have been variable (Gago and Mercado 1995). On the level of the university system, not a few institutions have introduced important modifications to their academic structure and their forms of functioning, in response to a more precise definition of their institutional mission. Furthermore, many of them have made important adaptations to their policies concerning tuition and grants, and they have elaborated programmes to facilitate the diversification of their funding sources. In addition, they have introduced substantial modifications to their institutional normative systems at different levels.

In other cases, the institutions developed a capacity to respond that projected a certain institutional image to the outside world, without necessarily or substantially modifying their internal functioning (Cohen et al. 1972; Weick 1976). The problem is that the evaluation strategies imply the implementation of new norms that propitiate certain utilitarian behaviours on the basis of which the institutions should demonstrate, even if it only symbolically, that they fulfil the functions bestowed on them. Here we can appreciate the importance of the discursive games and the mobilization of symbols, which when appropriately placed in evaluation documents and reports, can project a desired idea of the institution, without it necessarily being related to how things really proceed (Meyer and Rowan 1977; DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

More than a few institutions regarded these auditing mechanisms as means to obtain additional resources through necessary compliance with bureaucratic requirements. Such
institutions present their best face instead of undertaking a self-critical accounting of the overall institutional situation using concrete measures (ANUIES 1992). It is in this sense that the evaluation, on some occasions, led more to an institutional culture of simulation than to the raising of real qualitative transformations and institutional changes. In these cases, the evaluation mechanisms were used to justify decisions derived from unclear negotiations or political decisions adopted beforehand.

A similar story emerges in the case of the evaluation mechanisms for academic staff. Some maintain an exemplary ethical commitment to previous norms, framing their activities on a life project based on the value of knowledge per se, while another larger group of academics are guided by opportunist criteria. Operating under the premise that the end justifies the means, a good number of full time professors confront each other, mutually accusing each other of simulation, corruption and plagiarism. Conflicts emerge whose workplace consequences encourage the reappearance, in the role of a protagonist, of the union, a social actor from bygone days. Lately the number of cases of contracts being rescinded and scholastic decisions being adopted has multiplied, implying labour consequences, such as suspension of bonuses and scholarships, public recantation by academic bodies, and cancellation of teaching work in favour of the obligation to stay in the administrative office as a bureaucrat.

We can recognize some typical forms of academic fraud related to the functioning of the new rules, technologies and procedures of academic professionalization (Cicero 1998):

- the production of articles reworked for simultaneous publication, that is, a series of articles more or less put together, but with the same data and conclusions;
• an excessive number of authors for the same work, with a view that each of them receive credit for the publication of the article, even though one or two were really responsible. In fact, agreements have been established between different researchers for reciprocally including their names on each study, with the aim of artificially increasing their productivity;

• the use and manipulation of false or untrustworthy data;

• the presentation of artificially exaggerated data. For example, instead of reporting on the ten cases in experiments, 20 or 30 are mentioned so as to provide greater statistical validity to the analysis of the results;

• open plagiarism of articles written by other authors recovered from a remote place on the internet or assembled with the new technological skills associated with the use of a scanner;

• the appropriation of studies generally written by students specializing in a major, masters or doctorate degree programme.

• the publication of “home books” (in the corner print shop) without the appropriate academic peers evaluation;

• the very generous self-appraisal of a given study when its author occupies a position in the evaluation body or committee;

• the publication of old notes or work prepared years ago during masters or doctorate degree programmes, with a few retouches; and
• the preparation of extensive anthologies or compilations that bring together a series of
texts in a disorganized and incoherent fashion to cover the formality required in a course
one is teaching.

On the other hand, the institutions do not have organizational structures to regulate such conflicts
that have begun to grow in response to the existing impunity. The only possible alternative
solution lies in the creation of honour boards such as the one the SNI recently established to
regulate cases of non-compliance or violation of the rules or of professional ethics. However,
even these corrective measures will be insufficient if efforts are not made to consolidate
academic bodies that have ethically based leaderships that promote honest work under clear and
shared rules of behaviour.

Unfortunately, some recent public policy responses, in the form of academic training
programmes, pose risks. The risks of these types of training programmes are to be found in the
political pressure exercised by government agencies to fulfil the established goals, even if they
prove to be of little viability if implemented under strict criteria of academic excellence (Gil
1998: 11). The PROMEP, for example, has proposed four main goals that seem to point more to
the need to fulfil the political desires of government than the intention of substantially modifying
the levels of preparation of the academic body. Such goals are:

a) Almost quadrupling the number of full time professors (FTP) with a doctorate degree by
the year 2006, and increasing the number from the current 4000 to 15 000; it represents an
annual average growth rate of 14%;

b) Double the number of FTP, from 33 000 in 1995 to close to 68 000, and all with a
desirable academic profile;
c) Reduce the total number of part-time professors; and

d) Provide educational training in a masters degree programme or the appropriate major to 39,000 FTP who presently do not have such degrees (SEP 1996: 43).

Again, we see an excessive orientation toward meeting numerical goals without placing sufficient emphasis on the forms of operation that guarantee the substantive changes sought. These goals promote a weakening of postgraduate programmes under “fast track” modalities in which what is important is to finish “just in time,” without caring about how. These programmes will produce a tremendous explosion in “academicians with paper” with their respective degrees and credentials, joining the ranks of the official statistics, but without having been qualitatively transformed as subjects able to produce and communicate relevant knowledge in the traditional ways.

The situation that has developed does not matter to the government authorities and officials because they consider that the professionalization of the academic body is governed by market-oriented modes of rationality. In accordance with this vision, when there is a mass of individuals who share a certain activity, differentiation will tend to operate on the basis of individual performance mediated by market measures, so the diplomas will not be of importance in the long term. As “positional goods”, they will have lost their value because everyone has them rather than their being something to aspire to. The extent to which market measures can really recognize quality in substantive terms or go beyond the “needs of the market” and its subordination of productivity is unclear.

These recent policies include special income schemes, where improved scholarships are offered and there are incentive programmes for those who “satisfactorily” conclude their studies. Such schemes are also extended to those who want to return to the country after a long stay.
abroad [for example, the CONACYT’s programme for the retention and repatriation of Mexican researchers].

Conclusions

It is necessary to recognize the positive effects that can result from opening up the possibility of real change in many institutions or from encouraging academics whose have found an effective way to eliminate obstacles and inertias. However, these cases seem to be more the exception than the rule. As we have already indicated, too much confidence was placed on a voluntaristic model without paying attention to the viable conditions that its functioning demanded. In our opinion, the modernization programme in Mexico fails because it does not recognize the reality that it sought to transform. It seeks to implement a model that may be commendable in the abstract but that falls apart in the face of a reality in which it simply cannot operate. Mexico has the model but not the material conditions that guarantee its operation. What do we lack? We shall mention at least four elements:

a) We still do not have consolidated academic bodies, to the extent that we could base academic work in ethical principles, an essential requirement for the operation of a model that, as we have already seen, favours a utilitarian attitude in which the economic ends justifies the political means (Gil 1998).

b) We do not have sufficient resources to support teaching and research activities, a situation that provides a weak base for evaluation efforts: what is being evaluated, the performance or the shortcomings? For the model to function, a minimum degree of material equity that we lack is required, which contrasts on two levels. First, we lack appropriate work conditions in
Mexico, when compared with those on an international level with which policy makers want to compare us and whose criteria they want to evaluate us with. Second, work conditions in the country’s capital, in comparison with the situation prevailing in the states, differ considerably. In the latter case, the scientific-technological dependence of Mexico as a country is reproduced inside, concentrating all the efforts only in the big cities and following the dictates of the international division of research activities that leaves Mexico in a vulnerable position.

c) Salary levels for academic staff, in which merit pay and other financial incentives are now on a 70-30 ratio with respect to base salary instead of a 30-70 ratio, as occurs in other countries of the world. This situation produces an unstable labour situation for academics and increases both stress-levels and the need to resort to tricks in order to maintain or increase their remuneration.

d) Consequently, there are now unstable work conditions, due to the absence of a long-term academic-labour model for promoting the development of academic careers on the basis of collegiate mechanisms of regulation (Ibarra-Colado 1994, 1996).

These consequences indicate that the academic professionalization policies operating in Mexico only work as a fulcrum point to shift obstacles and inertias hindering change. However, to prolong these policies beyond their immediate positive effects means dismantling the academic communities that have promoted the development of the university during the past twenty years. To do so puts at risk conventional academic activities now in the hands of the “academicians of paper” trained in meeting the new norms. The long-term result would be unequivocal: the deep going social and cultural decapitalization of the universities, as they begin to function as efficient
bureaucratic corporations of knowledge socially integrated by an organizational culture based on individual performance and competition.

These are some open questions about the main problems that universities face in the continuous modernization process. The policies reviewed in this paper should be analysed integrally, because the solution of one set of problems in each space of relations demands modifications in the others. The “University of Excellence” is already present, operating varied mechanisms that begin to mould the identities of institutions and subjects in different ways. The collective social imagination has begun to play an important role as an ingredient in such mechanisms, in governing the unconscious behaviour of large contingents of individuals that are already infected by the virus of excellence. The old forms of resistance seem no longer to respond to these new government regimes, which act with the advantages provided by the invisibility of a slippery and intangible market. The search for an effective vaccine against modernization therefore seems to be a complex but inevitable task. Not to face it would imply, sooner or later, the expulsion of population groups that still resist, destroying the few defences that they still have left. After that we would have no other alternative other then to count the victims and remember the university as it used to be – as an institution of the past in which knowledge was cultivated that today is sold everywhere on the market. Is there no longer any space for the production of knowledge without the need for assessing its worth and gift wrapping it?

This modern dilemma requires us to rethink the notion of the university in entirely new and different terms, seeking formulas that restore the substantive value of education and the acquisition of knowledge. The modern university that we are producing, amid confrontations, conflicts, and negotiations, will undoubtedly lead to unknown situations that will open up new opportunities and raise dilemmas not currently visualized. The only impossibility lies in a naive
hope for return to the previous situation. This complex process does not contemplate a return to the past, and therefore the agents will have to design their strategies, visualizing the future of a university that will never again exist as it was like before its moment of transformation. The great challenge that we all face is to recreate an institution, without degenerating into an unbridled competition for the few resources, spaces, and places available. Therefore it is necessary to work for a new, radically different, ethic that allows us to move beyond simple possession of goods. Only then will the autonomy of the institutions and the subjects be capable of moving beyond the regulations and practices that today govern and limit the running of the university.

Is the market perhaps the only way to promote independent behaviour and responsible performance? We do not think so. The great challenge that we face today is to reconstruct the university under a different mode of rationality – one that conserves the advantages associated with individual initiative and responsible performance and at the same time favours solidarity and social justice. This must take place through the redefinition of an ethical project that avoids the atomisation resulting from opportunist utilitarianism, in its place strengthening the formation of communities that guarantee that the definitions, responsibilities, and benefits be shared based on fairness. Only in this way will we avoid the two extremes that have characterized our social organization, bureaucratic collectivism that encourages the dependency of anonymity or the ego-mercantile individualism that propitiates a savage war of “every man for himself”. We know that we will not return to the nostalgic past in which we were educated, but we are also convinced that the future is not that terrible scenario of the post-modern disillusion. We wager on the reflexive capacity that allows us, together, to redesign an uncharted future that we are beginning to imagine.
References


Glossary of Acronyms

(We use the acronyms for their initials in Spanish, with the exemption of those well known in English.)

ANUIES National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education
CEPAL Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean
CIDIE International Council for the Education Development
CONACYT National Council of Science and Technology
CONAEVA National Commission of Evaluation
CONPES National Coordination for Higher Education Planning
FOMES Higher Education Modernization Fund
FTP Full Time Professors
GNP Gross National Product
IMF International Monetary Fund
OECD Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PACIME Support Programme for the Science in Mexico
PROMEP Professorial Improvement Programme
SEP Public Education Ministry
SESIC Department of Higher Education and Scientific Research
SHCP Finance and Public Credit Ministry
SNI National System of Researchers
UAM Autonomous Metropolitan University
UAM-I Autonomous Metropolitan University, Campus Iztapalapa
UNAM National Autonomous University of Mexico
UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WB World Bank